

Be a part of our synagogue-wide initiative!

SMALL Groups

***A Palace in Time:
How Judaism Makes Every Moment Sacred***

Connect with others in an intimate setting
around meaningful topics



Explore Judaism in a personal
and relevant way



TEMPLE BETH EL
OF SOUTH ORANGE COUNTY

The Samueli Center for Progressive Judaism

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A Palace in Time: How Judaism Makes Every Moment Sacred

NOVEMBER 2022 – FEBRUARY 2023

The purpose of this program is to build deeper relationships with others through exploring how we connect with ourselves and others in sacred and meaningful ways. You will have the opportunity to meet for four sessions. Each session will include an 8-10 minute video accessed online, followed by a series of discussion questions that are included in this book. After watching the video as a group, the facilitator for that session allows for discussion around each of the discussion questions connected to the session.

OVERVIEW OF THE SESSIONS

Session 1 — The Practice of Blessing

Session 2 — Making Jewish Ritual Personal

Session 3 — Creating New Ritual With Jewish Themes

Session 4 — Embracing Life Transitions

INSTRUCTIONS FOR GROUP FACILITATOR

1. Choose a member of your group to be the liaison between your group and the Small Group Chairs:
Phyllis Blanc & Tamara Griffin
2. Plan your first meeting date and email the Small Group Chairs to let them know the of your date.
3. Decide where you will meet and who will help "lead" that session.

For each individual meeting, your job is simple:

1. Choose a facilitator – someone who moves the questions along – keeps the “Think/Pair/Share” format, makes sure that everyone has a chance to speak. You can be the facilitator or you can rotate it among the participants.
2. Play the Video - you can access the videos on our Temple Website on the Small Groups page.
3. Engage the discussion questions. Let the conversations be organic. You do not need to get through every question. Enjoy!

THINK – PAIR – SHARE DISCUSSION STRATEGY

Consider using the Think-Pair-Share strategy to manage your Small Group Discussion. This strategy

- Helps give individuals who need time to process time to formulate thoughts
 - Creates a space for individuals to share who may not feel comfortable sharing in a larger setting
 - Promotes active listening
1. **Think:** Participants think independently about the question that has been posed, forming ideas of their own.
 2. **Pair:** Participants are grouped in pairs to discuss their thoughts. This step allows participants to articulate their ideas and to consider those of others.
 3. **Share:** Participant pairs share their ideas with a larger group. Often, participants are more comfortable presenting ideas to a group with the support of a partner. (You can encourage participants to share what they learned from their partner to help encourage active listening).

SESSION 1

THE PRACTICE OF BLESSING

TEXT AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel - *God In Search of Man* - p. 48

The sense for 'the miracles which are daily with us,' the sense for the 'continual marvels,' is the source of prayer. There is no worship, no music, no love, if we take for granted the blessings or defeats of living. No routine of the social, physical, or physiological order must dull our sense of surprise at the fact that there is a social, a physical, or a physiological order. We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by offering a prayer before the moment of food. Each time we are about to drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation, 'Blessed are You...by Whose word all things come into being.' A rival act and a reference to the supreme miracle. Wishing to eat bread or fruit, to enjoy a pleasant fragrance or a drop of wine; on tasting fruit in season for the first time; on seeing a rainbow, or the ocean; on noticing trees when they blossom; on meeting a sage in Torah or in secular learning; on hearing good or bad tidings—we are taught to invoke God's great name and our awareness of God. Even on performing a physiological function we say, 'Blessed are You...who heals all flesh and does wonders.'

Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. According to Heschel, what is the purpose of reciting blessings?
2. In what ways do you take the wonders of the world for granted? How can we work to see their beauty and renew our appreciation for our surroundings?
3. Besides the practice of traditional Jewish blessings, what are other ways that you make ordinary moments sacred.

Traditional Jewish Blessings over Food

Transliteration & Translation

Each blessing begins *baruch atah adonai elokeinu melech haolam* (Blessed Are You G-d, our Lord, King of the World).

The endings depend specifically on what is to be eaten or drunk:

For Bread: "... Hamotzie lechem myn ha'aretz." (Who brings forth bread from the ground)

For Wine & Grape juice: "...Boreiy pree hagafen" (Who creates the fruit of the vine)

For Flour Based products that are not bread: "...Boreiy minei mezonot" (Who creates various types of foods)

For Fruits: "...Boreiy pree ha'etz" (Who creates the fruit of the trees)

For Vegetables: "...Boreiy pree ha'adamah" (Who creates the fruits of the ground)

For Drinks, Meat, Fish, Cheese: "...Shehakol Nihyah bidvaro" (Everything was created through His words)

For Discussion:

1. What is the point of having different blessings for different foods? Why not just say Hamotzi for everything?
2. While there are traditional blessings for other events like seeing a rainbow, or a person we haven't seen in a long time, or doing something for the first time, why do you think the rabbis put so much attention on saying a blessing before food? How does that help us make moments sacred?

SESSION 2

MAKING JEWISH RITUAL PERSONAL

TEXT AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

משנה אבות א':א

(א) משה קבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים, ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה. הם אמרו: (שלשה דברים, הוו מתונים בדין, והעמידו תלמידים הרבה, ועשו סג לתורה

Pirkei Avot 1:1

(1) Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples and make a fence round the Torah.

1. How do you understand this passing of Torah and wisdom?
2. What do you think it means to “make a fence around the Torah?” Do you think that this concept is important to the sanctity of ritual or there is flexibility?
3. If we have a “fence around the Torah” how far is “too far” in personalizing ritual?

פסחים ק"ט א:ג-ה

תנו רבנן חייב אדם לשמח בניו ובני ביתו ברגל שנאמר ושמחת בחגך במה משמחם בין רבי יהודה אומר אנשים בראוי להם ונשים בראוי להן אנשים בראוי להם בין ונשים במאי תני רב יוסף בבבל בבגדי צבעונין בארץ ישראל בבגדי פשתן מגוהצין תניא רבי יהודה בן בתירא אומר בזמן שבית המקדש קיים אין שמחה אלא בבשר שנאמר וזבחת שלמים ואכלת שם ושמחת לפני ה' אלהיך ועבשיו שאין בית המקדש קיים אין שמחה אלא בין שנאמר ויין ישמח לבב אנוש

Pesachim 109a:3-5

It was taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira says: When the Temple is standing, rejoicing is only through the eating of sacrificial meat, as it is stated: “And you shall sacrifice peace-offerings and you shall eat there and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 27:7). And now that the Temple is not standing and one cannot eat sacrificial meat, he can fulfill the mitzvah of rejoicing on a Festival only by drinking wine, as it is stated: “And wine that gladdens the heart of man” (Psalms 104:15).

1. How and why does this ritual change over time?
2. Other rituals associated with the Temple and sacrifice have been changed and adapted (such as the recitation of the *musaf* amidah instead of a Temple sacrifice), can you think of other examples you have observed?

בכל דור ודור תיבנים אנו לראות את עצמנו כאלו יצאנו ממצרים.

B'khol dor vador khayavim anu lir'ot et atzmeynu k'ilu yatzanu mimitzrayim.

In every generation, it is our duty to consider ourselves as if we had come forth from Egypt.

1. It's hard to imagine what slavery in Egypt was like - do you take this as a literal directive or figurative?
2. While traditionally read as part of the seder, this text stood out as the proof text for personalizing ritual - do you agree or disagree with this idea and why?

SESSION 3

CREATING NEW RITUAL WITH JEWISH THEMES

TEXT AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Making the Ordinary, Extraordinary: Creating ritual to mark time and sanctify important moments is our lives

Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. God, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing; let there be moments when Your Presence, like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk.

Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder:

"How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it!"

— Chaim Stern

Reform rabbi, liturgist, (b. 1930)

New rituals are being created every day to help us be more present and connected during life's most precious moments. This is how we mark time and bring deeper awareness to the miracles that fill our lives. Below are just a few examples of ways we can use ritual to elevate and bring intention to these moments.

MIKVAH is a ritual immersion that is to be done in living waters mimicking the waters of the womb, the very first waters in which we dwelt. Water is a symbol of healing; a source of life and renewal. When we emerge from the waters, we are changed. Below are the blessings to be recited. One may choose to perform this ritual to mark time and sanctify various life transitions (conversion, before surgery, leaving/starting a job, spiritual preparation for the High Holidays, etc)

ENTER MIKVAH, TAKE DEEP BREATH, IMMERSE COMPLETELY AND REMAIN UNDER WATER FOR A FEW MOMENTS.

COME UP, TAKE A BREATH, AND SAY THE BLESSING:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל הַטְּבִילָה

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al ha-t'vilah.

Blessed are you, Eternal God, ruler of the universe, who sanctifies us through mitzvot and has enjoined us concerning immersion.

DUNK A SECOND TIME!

COME UP, TAKE A BREATH, AND SAY THE BLESSING:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחְיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְנוּ הַזֶּה

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, shehecheyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higianu, la-z'man ha-zeh.

Blessed is the Eternal, the God of all creation, who has blessed me with life, sustained me, and enabled me to reach this moment.

Third blessing:
For conversion:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְיָ אֶחָד

Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad.

HEAR O ISRAEL, ADONAI IS OUR GOD, ADONAI IS ONE!

QUESTIONS:

1. What are some life transitions you have experienced? How were you able to acknowledge the transition in your life and what ritual(s) if any helped you to mark that moment?
2. Using the core of the mikvah ceremony above, how might you incorporate other meaningful components to this ritual to connect more deeply to one of these life transitions? (Examples: music or poetry on the theme of your transition; the collection of shells or stones that you can connect an intention to as you move toward your next chapter; think of what is most meaningful to you and how you like to express yourself)

CREATIVE PRAYER

- CREATION OF NEW LITURGY/ MUSIC/ ART/ POETRY as an expression of our deepest self and our personal views

“Two things are all you really need to know in order to pray – who you are, and what you feel today. In God’s presence with one another, we stand and wonder and sway – taking from our lives, and dreams of words we want to say.”
-Siddur Hineini

- ACTIVISM AS A FORM OF PRAYER

“I prayed for freedom for twenty years, but received no answer, until I prayed with my legs.”
-Frederick Douglas

(A similar statement is attributed to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great voices of faith of the 20th century. Rabbi Heschel marched with his good friend the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at Selma, Alabama, two weeks after Bloody Sunday, in support of the right of all Americans to vote. After the march, when he returned home to New York City, his students asked him if he had time on the day of the march to pray the traditional morning prayers. He reportedly told them: “I prayed with my feet.”)

Here is a creative setting of our morning blessings written in 2020 that is both rooted in tradition and brings in a creative voice in response to the pandemic:

Praised be the Eternal God, Source of the Universe...

...who has implanted mind and instinct within every living being. Who has given us a new day where we are alive and we too can see the difference between day and night, between light and darkness, between true and false, and between appropriate concern and panic

...who has made me a Jew or connected to the Jewish community. Who has given me the obligation, the tools and the resources to strive to act like a human being when others may be driven by fear, homophobia, racism.

...who has made me to be free. While my ability to be in physical community may be limited, help me see that I am still free to make choices every minute, every day.

...who opens the eyes of the blind. Please God, open the eyes of those in positions to make decisions for the community, for those researching new tests and vaccines, and cures. Give them the peace of mind to be clear-eyed as they do their work.

...who provides clothes for the naked. We all feel so incredibly vulnerable. As you clothed Adam and Eve as they left the garden, please give us the protection we need to stay healthy – physically and emotionally.

...who frees the captive. Free those carrying the burden of the community. Be present to them so that they do not feel alone in their decisions.

...who lifts up the fallen. Help us to recover, to stand straight again. Please send special blessings to the families and friends of those who have died or are suffering.

...who makes firm each person's steps. Give the leaders of our nation and all nations the resolve and the patience to deal with this crisis in the way that You would have them act.

...who girds our people Israel with strength. Let us come together as a community of support so that we are not isolated and alone. Let us find strength in You.

...who crowns Israel with glory. Let us still find the holiness in every day, in big and small ways.

...who gives strength to the weary. Give strength to those working in the medical clinics and hospitals and to helpers everywhere.

...who removes sleep from my eyes, slumber from my eyelids. Let me one day soon wake up to praise Your name first and not to think about tragedy and fear. Let all humanity arise from slumber and fight injustice wherever it may occur.

Let each of us understand what our role is in this effort to repair the world in partnership with You, so that one day You will be One and Your name will be One.

- Amy Asin (URJ's Vice President and Director of Strengthening Congregations)

QUESTIONS:

1. There are many ways in which we strive to find meaning and connection to the world around us, and how we “pray” doesn’t have to be limited to the words in our prayer book. What is a medium of spiritual engagement that is most meaningful for you?
2. What is a “prayer” experience that resonated with you and why?

3. **ACTIVITY:** Choose a theme and create your own expression of that theme in a way that best reflects you.

MINDFUL EATING

Food is a source of sustenance and pleasure. It brings us together around the table for holiday feasts and simple weekday meals. Baking challah with an old family recipe reminds us how food connects us to time and tradition. Trying an international dish at a new restaurant or growing our own tomatoes can show us the complex relationship between food and place. All of this is remarkable, providing so many reasons to pause and offer a blessing.

(Resource from the Institute for Jewish Spirituality)

Suggestions For Mindfulness In Eating: Attention and Intention

Eating in silence gives us an opportunity to pay attention to the full experience of eating without distractions. You might set an intention before you begin to eat for this particular meal. It could be as simple as tasting each mouthful of food. It could be putting the utensils down in between mouthfuls. It could be just paying attention to what is happening right now.

As when we set any intention, the attention will invariably wander. When you remember the intention, that is great. You can take a breath, and reconnect. Notice the attitude you bring to yourself. Try to be generous, gentle and spacious with your own mind. And when you are not, be gentle with that. Notice thoughts that come and go. Notice sensations in your body, sounds, colors, shapes, and texture is coming and going. Notice desire and aversion arising and passing. Notice other feelings. Notice gratitude. Feel yourself being nourished.

SESSION 4

EMBRACING LIFE TRANSITIONS

TEXT AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

The Sacred Pilgrimage,” by Rabbi Alvin Fine

(excerpted from [Mishkan HaNefesh](#): Rosh HaShanah: Machzor for the Days of Awe [NY:CCAR Press, 2015], p. 86)

Birth is a beginning
and death a destination.

But life is a journey:
from childhood to maturity
and youth to age;

from innocence to awareness
and ignorance to knowing;
from foolishness to discretion
and then, perhaps to wisdom;

from weakness to strength
or strength to weakness—
and often, back again...
from defeat to defeat to defeat—
until, looking backward or ahead
we see that victory lies
not at some high place along the way,
but in having made the journey, stage by stage,
a sacred pilgrimage.

Discussion Questions:

1. What have been the unexpected transitions in your life? In what ways has your life not followed a linear path?
2. If you had to tell the story of your life as a sacred journey - in which the events and moments of your life lead to growth and greater understanding - what would be the highlights of your story?

Bruce Feiler - adapted from Life Is In the Transitions

Tips for Navigating Transitions.

(Since there is a lot of text in this next piece, you may want to have people review this section before your group meeting and then if time, have people share their reflections about the various tips)

1. Start with your transition superpower

Once you enter a transition, you often feel either chaotic and out of control or sluggish and stuck in place. But my conversations suggest there is surprising order to these times.

For starters, transitions have three phases. I call them “the long goodbye,” in which you mourn the old you; “the messy middle,” in which you shed habits and create new ones; and “the new beginning,” in which you unveil your fresh self. These phases need not happen in order. Each person tends to gravitate to the phase they’re best at (their transition superpower) and get bogged down in the one they’re weakest at (their transition kryptonite).

While 40 percent find saying goodbye the hardest, others are quick to shut doors. While nearly half say the messy middle is hardest, others relish it. Jenny Wynn, a minister in Scottsdale, Ariz., initially resisted the call to replace her senior minister at a previous church after he died suddenly. But once she accepted, she thrived. She took a sabbatical, began drawing, and had his office repainted. “I needed time to transition my own thinking,” she said, “and I needed the congregation to transition how they thought of me.”

2. Identify your emotions

I asked all the people I interviewed the greatest emotion they struggled with during their transition. At 27 percent, fear was the most popular reaction, followed by sadness and shame. Some people coped with these emotions by writing down their feelings; others plunged into new tasks.

But nearly eight in 10 said they turned to rituals. They sang, danced, hugged, purged, tattooed, sky-dived, schvitzed. They changed their names, went to sweat lodges, got tattoos.

Following a brutal year in which she lost her job in Hollywood, had a blowup with her mother, and went on 52 first dates, Lisa Rae Rosenberg jumped out of an airplane. “I had a terrible fear of heights, and I thought, if I can figure this out, I can figure anything out.” A year later she was married with a child.

Ritualistic gestures like these are especially effective during the long goodbye as they’re statements — to ourselves and to others — that we’ve gone through a change and are ready for what comes next.

3. Shed something

Once we enter the messy middle, we shed things: mind-sets, routines, delusions, dreams. Like animals who molt when they enter a new phase, we cast off parts of our personality or bad habits.

After Michael Mitchell, a hard-driving urologist from Wisconsin, retired from four decades in medicine, he had to dispense with the idea that he should always be doing something constructive.

After Loretta Parham, a librarian in Atlanta, lost her daughter in a car accident and stepped in to raise her granddaughters, she had to give up merely indulging them and instead become more of a disciplinarian.

After John Austin stepped down from 25 years as a Drug Enforcement Administration agent, he had to get used to not having a gun. “Wait, now I have to per Feeling Stuck? Five Tips for Managing Life Transitions - The New York Times suade people to listen to me? I used to be able to compel them.”

Shedding is a way to clear out some unwanted parts of our lives to make way for the new parts to come.

4. Try something creative

In a pattern I didn't see coming, a remarkable number of people I interviewed turned to creativity while undergoing the shifts in their lives. They start to dance, cook, paint; they write poems, thank-you notes, diary entries.

At the moment of greatest chaos, they respond with creation.

Sarah Rose Siskind, a firebrand intellectual from California, learned to play the ukulele while going through a depression after leaving her job as a writer at Fox News and renouncing her conservative views.

Dwayne Hayes, a computer programmer in Michigan, was so shaken after his wife gave birth to stillborn twins that he quit his job and started a magazine about fatherhood.

Helen Kim, who stepped down from teaching college biology in the wake of her stomach cancer, fulfilled a girlhood dream by taking classes in adult ballet.

What people seem to crave from these acts is what creation has represented since the dawn of time: a fresh start.

5. Rewrite your life story

A life transition is fundamentally a meaning-making exercise. It is an autobiographical occasion, in which we are called on to revise and retell our life stories, adding a new chapter in which we find meaning in our lifequake. The lifequake itself may have been positive or negative, but the story we tell about it has an ending that's upbeat and forward-looking.

And that may be the greatest lesson of all: We control the stories we tell about our transitions. Instead of viewing them as periods we have to grind our way through, we should see them for what they are: healing periods that take the frightened parts of our lives and begin to repair them.

We can't keep the wolves from interrupting our fairy tales, and that's OK. Because if you banish the wolf, you banish the hero. And if there's one thing I've learned it's that we all need to be the hero of our own story.

A Creative Group Ritual For Life Transitions

Begin by having friends and family line a path for the individual marking the transition to walk through. Each individual holds a jar/cup filled with water. The transitioning individual begins at the start of the path holding an empty jar/bowl and states the following:

The transition I am about to honor is _____

She/He continues stating each of the following:

I am leaving behind _____

I fear _____

I need _____

I hope for _____

I welcome _____

As she/he makes each statement, the family and friends repeat:

You are _____

She/He continues walking as each statement is made. As the individual marking the transition makes her/his way through the path, each person she/he passes pours water from their jar into hers/his (representing support and giving). At the end of the path the individual marking the transition bows or pauses. The last person in the path then takes the jar/bowl from the transitioning individual and pours the water over the hands of the individual marking the transition

The transitioning individual says:

Blessed are you, G-d, who gives strength to me, and who is present in the unfolding of these changes.

The family and friends then say together:

Blessed are you, G-d, who gives strength to _____, and who is present in the unfolding of these changes.

Optional: Family and friends bring small symbols of transition to give to the individual marking the transition at the beginning of the ritual. Each person walks up to the transitioning individual and presents their symbol of change.

*If there are fewer people, this ritual can be done with just one supportive individual.



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